

From Airstream to Zephyr

Joe Mashburn's Long Skinny House With a Kink in It

Drexel Turner

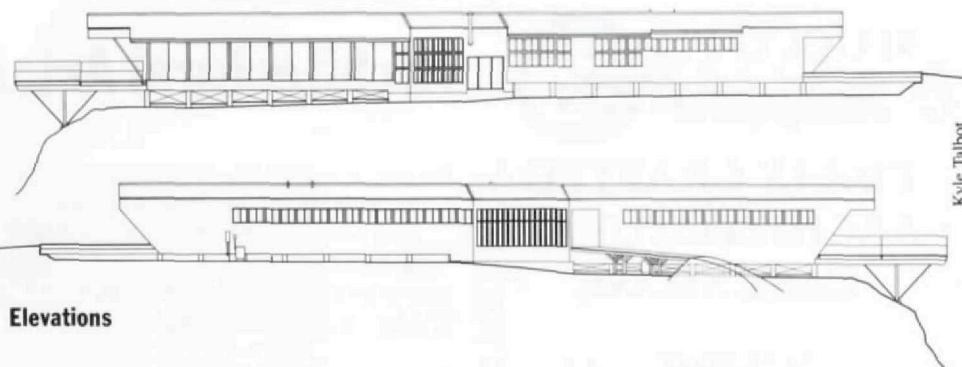
America's romance with the trailer, notwithstanding the ministrations of Buckminster Fuller and Airstream, is more fictive than real. Even if, as J.B. Jackson marvels, far more Americans than is usually supposed avail themselves of this inherently marginal, semi-portable form of housing, they do so, by and large, out of scarcely disguised desperation. Such resort, made more poignant by expedients at disguise, leads to the real and opposite, mass consumption end of the Airstream mystique. In freer circumstances, efforts to embellish, customize, even de-"nature" the type altogether, can produce what Charles Moore has recognized as "a subspecies of trailers, a sort of parallel to the houseboats built by counter-culture wood butchers out of recycled trucks and buses and redwood . . . neo-gypsy wagons . . . [that combine] in a funky way, a kind of log-cabin sense of one-offness with vague intimations of an industrial society based on mobility."¹

Rarely, considering the disrepute of the type itself, does anyone set out to do the reverse, to let mechanization retake command. But this is more or less what Joe Mashburn has attempted to do, with considerable low-tech, down-home charm, in his long skinny house with a kink in it, a tenure piece slipped into a sliver-like opening in six acres of woods near College Station, Texas. The result manages to merge the romance of the Airstream with a sanitized, Ken Keyseyan spirit of improvisation in pursuit of splendid though mortgaged isolation. It does so with an audacity that earlier this year attracted, site unseen, the not unprejudiced admiration of Reyner Banham, who learned of it from Joel Warren Barna's account in *Texas Architect*.² Banham, in the course of questioning, for the readers of *Design Book Review*, recent tendencies in architect-produced, neo-vernacular

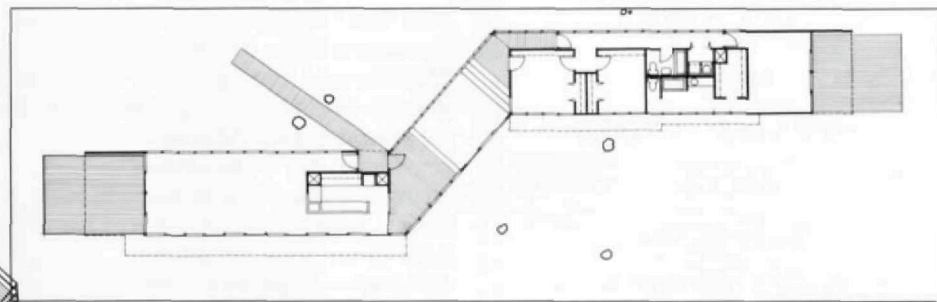
buildings in Australia as alternately overdetermined or reminiscent of "the California 'wood butcher mode' but in tin," pointed, by way of happier illustration, to Mashburn's effort as "the only appropriate comparison anywhere else in the world," signaling with a single blip of the word processor, the investiture of College Station's first "world class" building.³

Just how did Mashburn manage to succeed, where others before had failed, in putting Aggie-land on the map, and in a manner at once off-handed and appealing? Part of the explanation lies further down the Brazos watershed, in Houston, where Mashburn spent much of the sixties and seventies, living at one point in an Airstream trailer parked behind the Natural Child Restaurant in mid-Montrose. Moving further afield, he and co-conspirators at Charles Tapley Associates concocted a Volkswagen-bus-based fantasy in the cause of mechano-spiritual mobility captioned "Take Me to Mountain" that received a *Progressive Architecture* design award in 1971. When in 1974 he designed and built a house himself, of cinder blocks mostly, he plugged the Airstream into it and used it as a bedroom. But despite the promising ring of his own eventual professional enterprise, "Mashburn's Prodigious Drive-In Plan Service," so suited it would have seemed to the spirit of Houston then as now, Mashburn found himself in College Station in the early eighties, teaching in the College of Architecture at Texas A&M.

At first, the post-Aquarian family Mashburn (Joe, Julia, and son Mars) endured the rigors of a conventional suburban tract house along with those of greater College Station. Then, in an act of potential folly but understandable desperation, with academic tenure far from assured, they sank their life's



Elevations



Plan

savings in a house, completed in 1985, that paradigmatically defies J.B. Jackson's *sine qua non* of housing for the many - fungibility.⁴ Fortunately, the house turned out to have a self-fulfilling effect on tenure deliberations. So, should they wish, the Mashburns need never test the Brazos Valley resale market for 17-foot-wide, corrugated metal-clad, wood-frame houses built in the shape of a box-culvert with a bend in the middle and a slightly pitched roof.

The bend or kink in the middle of the house is circumstantial rather than premeditated, the outcome of a site analysis by landscape architect Tom Woodfin, to minimize further clearing of the site.⁵ It serves as well to manifest the division of the house into two distinct wings, offset and connected by an enclosed "dog trot" or breezeway that comprises the kink. One wing is devoted to sitting, dining, and cooking, the other to sleeping and bathrooms. In organization and effect, the layout is more railroad- than trailer-like, tracking back in a sense to H.H. Richardson's enthusiasm for the architectural possibilities of train cars as well as to that shared by Joe and Mars for the streamlined passenger trains they observed on a visit to Italy in the early eighties. In fact, the kink gives the impression of a small train wreck, an edge that distinguishes it from other quasi-industrial extruded houses, whether refined in the manner of Pierre Chareau's recently razed Quonset studio-house for Robert Motherwell on Long Island, or ostensibly crude, like the habitable sewer-pipe projects of Osamu Ishiyama.⁶ An appreciation of the Mashburn house that appeared recently in the *Architectural Review* also alluded to an unexpected but not necessarily inappropriate "sealed train" ambience within, detected on the basis of a nighttime visit during which small woods

creatures knocked about in the "undercroft."⁷

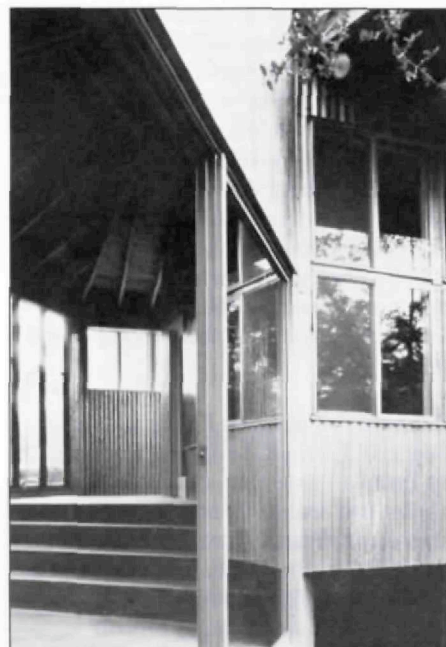
The appeal of Mashburn's Brazos Bottom Breakdown is such that one might hope its suggestive potential could reappear somehow in Houston. So far, the nearest thing to taking the railroad idea for a walk around the block here can be found in the raked windows of *Arquitectonica's* wishfully named, L-shaped Zephyr shopping strip, a block west of Kirby Drive on Lake Street, and in Jim Goode's Seafood Restaurant a half-mile south, also one block off Kirby, which incorporates a nickel-plated, streamlined dining car as a frontispiece, like a radiator grille applied to an otherwise expansive and conventional shell. One could imagine instead, a conga line of dining cars jackknifing across Goode's caliche parking lot, prepared to take on the ale and quail club at the next stop, a sort of Magnolia Blossom Special to make you thank your lucky stars you're still in Texas. ■

Notes

- 1 Charles Moore, "Trailers," in Moore, Smith and Becker, *Home Sweet Home*, New York: Rizzoli, 1983, pp. 49-50.
- 2 Joel Warren Barna, "A House Long on Light," *Texas Architect*, March/April 1986, pp. 40-41.
- 3 Reyner Banham, "Toward a Modestly Galvo Architecture?," *Design Book Review*, Spring 1988, pp. 49-51.
- 4 J.B. Jackson, "Urban Circumstances," *Design Quarterly*, vol. 128, 1985, p. 30.
- 5 Although Mashburn could hardly have known of it, Charles Moore had toyed with an almost identical kinked footprint for housing in Ocala, Florida in the early 1970s. Eugene J. Johnson, ed., *Charles Moore: Buildings and Projects 1949-1986*, New York: Rizzoli, 1986, p. 84, fig. 43.
- 6 *A New Wave of Japanese Architecture*, Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, 1978, pp. 42-47.
- 7 Peter Buchanan, "House, East Central Texas," *Architectural Review*, May 1988, pp. 74-76.



Hall of sleeping wing.



Intersection of dogtrot and sleeping wing.



Living-dining-kitchen wing.

© 1988 Paul Hester, Houston

© 1988 Paul Hester, Houston

© 1988 Paul Hester, Houston